

May 2012

Senior Health and Wellness Newsletter

Kentucky Department for Aging and Independent Living

Cholesterol 101

What is Cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance in the body. Your body needs some cholesterol to work properly. If you have too much cholesterol in your blood, it can stick to the walls of blood vessels causing them to become narrow or blocked leading to a heart attack or stroke.

Cholesterol levels tend to rise as we get older and can creep up on you without warning. If you don't know your levels be sure to get them checked. If your levels are high, lowering them can lower your risk of developing heart disease or stroke.

Particles called lipoproteins carry cholesterol in the blood. LDL ("bad") cholesterol makes up the majority of the cholesterol in the body. Too much LDL leads to a buildup in the blood vessels. HDL ("good") cholesterol reduces the risk for heart disease. HDL mops up bad cholesterol and flushes it from the body which reduces the risk of heart disease and stroke. With HDL, higher levels are better. Smoking, being overweight, and being sedentary all cause low HDL levels.

Desirable Cholesterol Levels:

Total Cholesterol — Less than 200 mg/dL

LDL (bad Cholesterol) — Less than 100 mg/dL

HDL (good cholesterol) — 40 mg/dL or higher.

Note: HDL 60 mg/dL or above is considered protective against heart disease.



Triglyceride levels are important too. People with high blood triglycerides usually also have lower HDL cholesterol and a higher risk of heart attack and stroke. Triglycerides should be below 150 mg/dL.

To improve your cholesterol levels try these recommendations.

- Control your blood pressure.
- Avoid Tobacco.
- Exercise regularly.
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- If you have Diabetes, manage it.
- Take any prescriptions your physician recommends.
- Eat a healthy diet.
 - Increase fruits and vegetables.
 - Increase the fiber in your diet.
 - Watch your portions.
 - Eat whole grains.
 - Reduce saturated and trans fats in your diet.
 - Reduce the cholesterol in your diet.

Cholesterol 101 Continued

Improving Cholesterol Through Diet. Saturated fat and cholesterol in the food you eat makes your blood cholesterol level go up. Saturated fat is the main culprit, but cholesterol in foods also matters. Reducing the amount of saturated fat and cholesterol in your diet helps lower your blood cholesterol level. Try to avoid fatty meats, processed meats, whole fat dairy products, lard, and products made with saturated or trans fats. Read the Nutrition Facts Label to help you identify foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol.

Improving Cholesterol Through Weight Loss. Being overweight tends to increase your cholesterol levels. Losing weight can help by lowering LDL, total cholesterol, and triglyceride levels and raising HDL. To lose weight try the following tips.

- Increase fruits and vegetables.
- Watch portion sizes.
- Increase exercise.
- Increase fiber.
- Limit sweets.

Improving Cholesterol through Physical Activity. Regular physical activity can help lower LDL and raise HDL levels. It can also help you lose weight. You should try to be physically active for thirty minutes most days of the week.

For more information:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - <http://www.cdc.gov/cholesterol/>
- National Cholesterol Education Program - <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncep/index.htm>

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